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ABSTRACT

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# WHAT CAN WE EXPECT OF A BILINGUAL PROGRAMME?

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## ABSTRACT

How do the expectations for bilingual educational programmes of legislators, educators, parents, students and ethnic leaders match one another? What expectations are implicit in the actual practice of schools, of homes, of evaluators? How does all this fit in with what we understand about the best way for children to learn a language? In this article I attempt to answer these questions and in so doing find much that is contradictory, much that is misleading, and much that is just poorly conceived. I also suggest what seem to me more reasonable approaches to the relevant issues.

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[1] Paper read at the Second International Conference on Bilingual and Bicultural Education, New York, May, 1974.

What exactly does Washington expect of the money it gives for a bilingual programme and are its various expectations consistent with one another? What do parents, teachers and children expect of such a programme? Are their various expectations consistent with one another and with Washington's? When project directors submit proposals to Washington they state the project's objectives. How do these match those of Washington and those of parents, teachers and children? Evaluators measure the sucess of projects and implicitly accept a set of objectives. How do these correspond to all the others I have mentioned? Are these various expectations realistic? These are the questions to which I wish to draw your attention.

You may wonder how an Irishman in Canada knows anything about all this. Well, I married a native informant--I married a project director in North Vermont. I evaluated her project the year after she left it. In the course of my work as evaluator I studied the proposals and evaluations of several projects. And I came as a consultant to the National Puerto Rican Development and Training Institute (1973) in New York and learned a lot from them and from their report. Incidentally the President of our convention, Hernán Lafontaine, was a consultant to that project. From these persons and experiences I borrow unashamedly for my talk today.

Federal Expectation

Title VII funding is in the spirit of operation headstart. Twice in the Act and once in the guidelines we are told explicitly that the funding is for districts where the people are poor, and, the Act clearly indicates, where the children do poorly at school. Moreover, bilingual projects are

mainly to help children whose English is inadequate to become proficient in English. There is some talk about giving to "students a knowledge of the history and culture associated with their languages" and some about being "more liberally educated" if they know another language in addition to English. But throughout there is a strong impression that Title VII is really aimed at helping non-English speakers to become English speakers and to better their standing in school generally.

This implies that what Washington wants to hear about from an evaluator is how the children are getting on in English, mathematics, and science. The rest is peripheral.

Why then does Washington speak about bilingual programmes? If the aim is to teach English to French- or Spanish-speaking children, why teach them French or Spanish? It is most unlikely that teaching them French or Spanish will improve their English. (For the moment I want to lay aside the teaching of mathematics, history and science through the medium of French or Spanish.) Perhaps the answer is that French or Spanish are fine languages to know. But then why not promote them among the well to-do and the middle classes? The whole tone of the funding creates the impression that French or Spanish are unfortunate maladies which the poor have contracted and cannot get rid of on their own.

Unless I am mistaken I detect a certain inconsistency in Washington's support for languages other than English in the present context. The impression is increased when I look at what the official documents say about the Anglo-Americans who go to project schools. There is an old silence about them. No impression is given that French or Spanish is important for them and this suggests that French or Spanish really are unfortunate maladies. The programmes look like a linguistic bridge over which Franco-

or Spanish-American children travel to the English side. There seems to be a one-way arrow on that bridge.

French speakers and Spanish speakers are taught subjects like mathematics and history in their native languages and that is certainly in conformity with the idea of helping such children to improve their grades in those subjects. But if it helps to teach mathematics to backward Spanish speakers in Spanish, by what logic does it help to teach backward English speakers in Spanish? Yet many bilingual programmes do just that. That they should seems a natural consequence of a bilingual programme in a linguistically mixed area. Unquestionably the idea of the teachers and administrators who do this is to use mathematics and history to better the Spanish of English speakers. On my analysis of the thinking behind the act, this is a mistake. The principle idea is to improve English and content subject grades. If you have to choose between achievement in Spanish and achievement in mathematics, you are expected to choose mathematics. This is the intention of the Act, but it is not so clearly expressed as to exclude completely the choice of Spanish. This is a source of misunderstanding.

Expectations of Parents, Teachers and Children

Much of the rhetoric that surrounded the setting up of bilingual projects introduced expectations far removed from those of the legislators of Title VII. It is inevitable that federal funds for bilingual schooling should excite in some minds hopes of language preservation, the strengthening of ethnic identity and the shoring up of traditional values, approved behaviour, and religious devotion.

Others, more in harmony with the legislation, saw in Title VII a chance to insure to children who did not speak English well a good grounding

in English, access to the educational ladder, hence to the power and wealth of the United States, and, if I am not mistaken, a chance to leave behind all that distinguished one from an Anglo-American.

Clearly these two sets of hopes are at odds with one another. The first set was the one that was voiced. It is the one with the nobler undertones. The other one was at work all right, but it would have been a delicate matter to express it. It is unfortunate when reality and rhetoric part company in this manner.

In my view the conformists--as I shall call them--were the more realistic. It is a universal experience--and hence one of education's few truly scientific laws--that primary and secondary schools do not lead society. They are led by it. Only a decadent society relies on schools to maintain languages, morals, ethnic identity, religion. The fate of these is determined outside the school, and the most we can expect of schools is that they support society in its stated or unstated ambitions, or at any rate the nobler ones among them. Schools will never make French or Catholicism, or virtue fashionable.

On the other hand the conformist hopes are also largely illusory. Operation headstart has taught us that schooling is not the royal road to wealth and power. Schools are not a substitute for family life and healthy social processes. Certainly some children who by nature or upbringing come to school with the grit and the ability to overcome social prejudice can use school to better their lot. But the majority do not come so endowed.

Objectives in Project Proposals

In project proposals the aims of the legislator are translated into precise terms by the project director. I want to change the scale of the discussion and focus attention on these statements of objectives.

Somehow education in the U.S. has fallen into the hands of businessmen who demand that inputs, processes and outputs be specified in quantified terms. All the proposals I saw and the comments on them by project auditors (the term is an interesting one) attempt such specificity. This is certainly in keeping with the spirit of the Act which, like much recent educational legislation, demands evaluation and accountability.

There is an obvious difficulty. We cannot give the specifications of a human being which are relevant for education. The multipurpose IQ does not even come close. This is not trivial, because what we can expect of individuals or of a class depends on the sort of children they are. Moreover, we cannot specify what it is we teach. We have some general notions, but no specific ones. For instance, we cannot specify what it is one learns when one learns a grammatical structure. We have only a vague notion of the elements of which a grammatical rule speaks, and we have very little notion about how the rule should look so that it should have psychological reality. When do you say I have learned a rule? When I make no mistake at all? That is probably too exacting. Take the negative in French. It is usually expressed by ne before the verb and pas after. So, je ne bois pas (I do not drink). There are some words which contain an implicit negative and with these the pas is obligatorily dropped. So, je ne vois rien (I see nothing). Suppose a child has learned this and can say je ne vois rien, je ne mange rien, je ne fais rien, but makes a mistake with a similar word, personne, and says je ne vois pas personne? Does he know the rule? Or suppose he does not know how to combine such negatives with the auxiliary--je n'ai rien vu. Or suppose he does not know where to place the object pronouns in such a sentence -- je ne l'aime point. Then there is the negative command and so on and so

on. Each rule interacts with many other rules to such an extent that it is almost impossible to know at times which is which.

I was amazed to read in some proposals that 80% of the children would learn 75% of the French structures which it was proposed to teach. There is no need to stress that this borders on lunacy. Moreover I am quite sure that teachers have little notion what structures they are using in talking to children--anymore than I know what ones I am using now. So in fact teachers do not know what has been taught. The ones a teacher illustrates in his speech may not be the ones listed in the class programme.

One of the most disabling things about all this is that it draws attention to the wrong thing--to language. I have argued elsewhere (Macnamara, 1973)[2] that in teaching language the attention of neither teacher nor student should be on language but rather on the meaning. "Take care of the sense and the sounds will take care of themselves."

What about other things? Could we aim at insuring that 80% of the children would derive 80% of the possible satisfaction from a poem? Or could we aim to create in 80% of children 80% of the maximum possible self respect and 80% of the maximum possible respect for others? Does it make any better sense to aim at giving children 80% of the possible understanding of the arithmetic they encounter? One might propose to give them an arithmetic exam and aim at having 80% solve 80% of the problems. But what does this mean in terms of understanding arithmetic? Even more modestly, what sort of guarantee have we that the exam accurately assesses understanding of arithmetic? By a series of very slight modifications in the exam we could artificially manipulate the numbers solving the problems.

The whole attempt to state the outcome of education in precise operational terms has the musty smell of logical positivism or behaviourism.

It is odd that when such tenets have grown old and wearisome in their parent disciplines they should enjoy a renewed youth in education. Furthermore, the whole attempt to specify means that project directors are made fantastically busy. They are forced by Washington to make statements which many of them believe to be fatuous. They are also busied in seeing that teachers have materials and drills which are designed to generate the specified cognitive skills. I repeat, this is the wrong thing to concentrate upon. What they and the teachers ought to be busy about is ways that vitally engage the attention of children and create needs for communication--such as cooking class and games and handicraft lessons. They ought, too, to be concerned about whether the children are learning to express themselves better in both languages in a noticeable way, whether they understand what they are about in arithmetic and science, whether they and their teachers are happy at their work, whether the children are developing interest in interesting things, whether they are growing into more competent and confident people, whether the parents are satisfied with their progress, whether the bilingual programme is growing into the life of the schools. Yet none of these matters is quantifiable even in the odd way which people think they can quantify grammatical structures. And not being so quantifiable, they tended to escape attention. In the history of psychometrics it has ever been so.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not opposed to hard work and in favour of sloppy thinking. I am not advocating that teachers ought not to prepare lessons. What I am saying is that in preparing a lesson the emphasis ought to be on the message, not on the medium. I am not opposed to tests, but I am opposed to quantified statements about attainment which are an offense to human intelligence. I am not opposed to the pursuit of

excellence in language, mathematics or history. I am opposed to the total neglect of other important objectives which must be included in any educational programme no matter how difficult it is to quantify them.

Project Evaluations

All that I dislike about proposals occurs again in connection with evaluation. The evaluator is required to determine whether the objectives have been achieved. There is no need to go over the matter again. Instead, let us look at the procedures which an evaluator usually employs and see what objectives are implicit in them and their general validity and usefulness. In doing so, we will be forced into even finer detail than in the preceding section.

Evaluators seem to feel no need to be intelligible, and so one wonders why one evaluates at all. At present one merely receives notice that the grade point average for a particular class in English was X and in mathematics Y. Such figures mean nothing to parents and, I venture to add, to educational administrators. They are also misleading. We have frequently been told that blacks are so many points of GPA behind whites in grade 1, and that they fall further behind as they progress through school. We now know that this is misleading. The spread of grade points increases with age, and in terms of percentiles the two groups hold their own. Grade point average is a dangerous metric.

So too are any standardized tests. As a result of the Coleman report, educational psychologists have begun to wonder whether standardized tests flatten out differences between teachers, between schools and between programmes. Standardized tests are so constructed that they tend to maximize distinctions within a classroom, but minimize distinctions between classrooms. One reason is the choice of questions. Questions which deal

with matters that have not been dealt with in all or nearly all classes are dropped straight away. Thus, standardized tests give little credit to the inventive or adventurous teacher or programme. New tests are tried out in a small number of average classrooms to provide data for item selection. Items which most children solve are thrown out and so too are ones which few children solve. From start to finish, standardized tests aim at measuring mediocrity and penalizing departures from it. By those tests you can be outstandingly mediocre or poorly mediocre. They are not suitable for comparing one educational program with another. Yet have you ever seen an evaluation which was not based largely upon them?

This points to a new type of test which is constructed in such a way as to maximize differences between programmes or between classes. My friend George Madaus, of Boston College, is at present exploring the possibilities of constructing such tests. But even if he succeeds, the output of such a test is likely to be a grade or a score, and these are largely unintelligible. In my own evaluation of a bilingual project I attempted to make myself intelligible by reporting samples of what children were able to do and estimates of how many could perform at that level or better. So I included samples of the stories children told in French and of the passages they were able to read. This I did for the beginning and end of the year so that everyone could see what progress the children had made. I should have extended this to arithmetic and other subjects.

Indeed nothing brought home to me more what Title VII was all about than the directives I received in response to my evaluation proposal. In my proposal I included with academic attainment some detailed studies of language usage in the community and how the programme had affected it. In particular, I wanted to see if the Franco-Americans spoke more French

at home, in school, in the playground, in the school buses. To do this I included interviews with the teachers, the local storekeepers, the parish priest, the ladies who served the school meals, students who had gone through the schools before the programme began. I also wished to study the attitudes of teachers to Franco-Americans and the attitudes of Anglo- and Franco-Americans to each other. To do this I had assistants study the extent to which teachers addressed questions to members of the two groups, and friendship patterns and play patterns among the children. Studies carried out in connection with operation headstart have made it clear that such behaviour and such attitudes have very serious consequences for the children concerned.

In a letter dated July 25, 1972, the project director reported to me the reaction of the officer in Washington who was in charge of French-English projects. About the evaluation of attitudes and social relationships he wrote to me: "...the evaluation of this aspect or outcome of a bilingual project is considered of secondary importance in so far as the government is concerned. ...a rationale for its inclusion as a major part of our evaluation would need very strong arguments indeed." I do not blame the civil servant who reacted in this way; he was merely doing his duty as he understood it and I think he understood it quite clearly.

The Pursuit of the Possible

I have been critical of the objectives of Title VII projects, and it is understandable that I might be asked to explain what in my view would be reasonable. Here are some suggestions.

It is reasonable to teach a child to read and write his native language. It is reasonable to teach him his arithmetic, science, and history in the language he knows best. Hence it is reasonable to set up bilingual schools

for children whose language is Spanish or French.

It is unreasonable to make a child feel that the variety of his native language which he and his parents speak is despicable. He needs to know the standard variety, but not at the expense of his pride and self respect. So a sensitive teacher will introduce the standard variety as another way of speaking, one which has wider currency than the variety the child happens to speak. A sensitive teacher will also know the child's variety.

It is reasonable to teach a child in the United States English--as another great language, and one which is immensely useful in the United States. I would not worry about the so-called content subjects--mathematics, history and science. The child who has been well grounded in mathematics and understands what he is about--all in the medium of Spanish--will have no difficulty changing to English, provided he really knows English. One of the lessons of the St. Lambert experiment in Montreal is that subjects like mathematics are not language specific.

It is also reasonable to teach an English-speaking child who lives in a largely Spanish-speaking area to speak Spanish. Both the local variety and the standard one.

It is reasonable to teach an Anglo-American child his arithmetic in English. In a school which has Spanish speakers as well as English ones, this may make for complications such as putting the grade 3 and grade 4 Anglo-American children together for arithmetic separate from the grades 3 and 4 Spanish-American ones.

If all this is so reasonable, why is it so only for the poor? I would like to make a plea even at this late date to extend Title VII to less impoverished neighbourhoods. Unfortunately the sum of money which

would be involved would be pitifully small--but it would have the effect of correcting the implicit public rhetoric to the effect that foreign languages are for the alien poor. I am not speaking of miracles--just suggesting that the poor Spanish child should not be too separated institutionally from those of his group who have adapted to the system. Incidentally, those who have adapted need the poor just as much as the poor need them.

From a programme such as I outline, well managed, well staffed by sensitive and sympathetic teachers, I would not expect to see the evils of our society corrected. I would expect to see the children of foreign speech adapt better to school, to see the Anglo-Americans gain some proficiency in another language, and to see both groups more understanding and appreciative of each other.

Conclusion

From my review of official policy and practice, you will have gathered that it is my view that generally government officials and governments as a whole do not know how to manage educational enterprises. But they are generally willing to learn from those who do. I find the reactions of teachers and administrators less than open and honest. Many of them have not adopted the businessman's approach to education. Many of them in their hearts reject the precise quantification of educational objectives. Some, at least, reject the adulation of standardized tests. Many of them want to deal with human beings in a human manner. They feel frustrated by the constraints under which they work. Who but they can change things? Title VII marked a large step forward. The time has come for another and if teachers and administrators don't insist upon it, it will not be taken. But I guarantee that if as many as three strong-minded

people agree together that things must change and if they take a serious decision to change them, then they will succeed. Success will not come in a day; but then neither did Title VII.

FOOTNOTES

[1] The preparation of this paper was aided by a grant from Canada Council to the author. The Vermont program referred to in the test was the Orleans-Essex North Supervisory Union Bilingual Program. The evaluation of this program for 1972-73 is available from the Bilingual Education Branch of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Washington, D.C.

[2] Macnamara, J. Nurseries, streets and classrooms: Some comparisons and deductions. Modern Language Journal, 1973, 58, 250-254.